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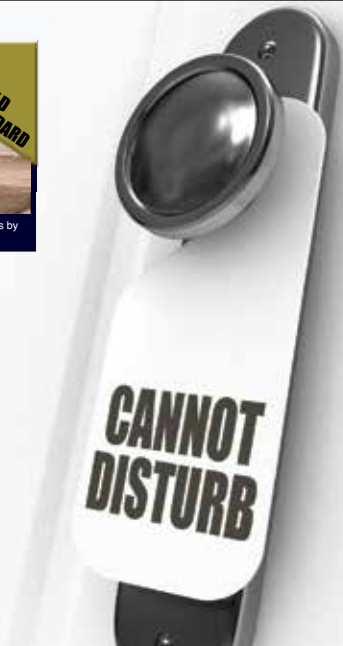
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Rest ashore

Ambitious guesthouse owner Stephen Bull has created an enviably chic coastal retreat in just two years. *Jane Duru* finds out more

From his first entrepreneurial foray selling sunbeds at the age of 17 to becoming a property developer and running a guesthouse in his hometown of Lincoln, Stephen Bull has never been one for doing things by halves. After taking a seven-year break from the hospitality trade, Stephen got back into the industry with his biggest project yet: A Room with a View, a ten-bedroom guesthouse on the Brighton seafront that opened in 2012.

Know your audience

During his break, Stephen was on the lookout for a new bed and breakfast business. It took him four years to find the Grade II Listed building. "I came down [to Brighton] two or three times looking at various properties, but nothing hit the mark," says Stephen. "As soon as this came on the market, I went to have a look at it. It was derelict, but I could see the potential to realise my vision and so decided to buy it." The building had previously been a guesthouse but had been badly neglected.



Clockwise, from above: Cereals and muesli are available at breakfast; John, a longtime member of staff; binoculars add a quirky touch; the guesthouse has luxurious bathrooms



Clockwise, from above: High housekeeping standards are a top priority; guests rave about the English breakfast fry-ups; contemporary decor runs throughout

> Despite being told by an architect that certain configurations would be “impossible”, Stephen was determined to create a high-end boutique guesthouse and was unwilling to compromise in certain areas. “She dismissed my designs for ensembles with roll-top baths and walk-in showers, and insisted that a corner bath with a shower curtain was the only feasible solution,” he says. “That’s not the sort of product I was looking for – I wanted it to be more luxurious than that.” In the event, his designs won out.

Stephen has brought the guesthouse up to the highest standards. Large flatscreen TVs and Nespresso coffee machines feature in every room, while guests are given fresh towelling robes and slippers. Bathrooms are equipped with a separate bath and rainfall showers, along with designer toiletries and heated towel rails. Guests can even enjoy views of the ships at sea using the pairs of binoculars provided in some of the rooms.

The emphasis on creating a special environment is an obvious and deliberate choice by Stephen. “I’m trying to appeal to couples celebrating special occasions and coming down for the weekend, business travellers and anyone looking for high-quality accommodation in Brighton,” he says. The guesthouse’s incredible sea views are another obvious selling point, with nine out of the ten rooms featuring sweeping views of the beach and nearby Ferris wheel. It’s a great plus point and one of which he is evidently proud.

“We always ask guests if they’re celebrating anything and if they are, we put locally made chocolates in the room”

However, plenty of hotels in the nearby area also boast sea views. To distinguish A Room with a View, Stephen has echoed local efforts to turn Brighton into a first-class destination, by making the guest experience central. “From the moment they first make contact, you’ve got to show interest. We always ask them if they’re celebrating anything and if they are, we put some locally made chocolates in the room and leave a little card and welcome note for them,” he says. “It’s putting the customer at the heart of the experience and giving them a really good time.” The lack of an on-site restaurant gives Stephen another chance to demonstrate excellent service by providing an in-room information pack that contains extensive advice on options in the city.

With parking at a premium in Brighton, Stephen has also invested in buying and renting car-parking spaces from neighbours, enabling him to offer free parking to all guests. “A lot of my guests say that was a deciding factor; their previous

experience has been of driving around Brighton for an hour or two, unable to park,” he says. “So I thought it was a worthwhile investment and a good business strategy.” Having spent £25,000 to buy a car-parking space, Stephen admits it’s a steep investment, but along with the high proportion of sea-facing rooms, it allows him to make a unique selling point out of his accommodation and attract guests who are willing to pay a premium for the benefit of parking their car nearby.

Getting out there

By focusing so highly on the guest experience, A Room with a View consistently garners five-star reviews on websites such as TripAdvisor. The strategic benefits of providing great service are a no-brainer in Stephen’s eyes. “Because we give such good customer service, and because we have a good-quality product when guests get here, they tend to recommend us to their friends and come back themselves,” he explains. “It’s so expensive to market these days that it’s really important to get returning customers; that way, less of our turnover goes on marketing.” Currently around 10% of visitors are repeat. Stephen hopes to increase this by maintaining high standards: “We’ve only been open two years. Ten years down the line we could be doing a much higher percentage of repeat visitors,” he says.

The property is also advertised with various marketing agencies, but due to the high cost of monthly fees (anything

up to £4,000) and the commission taken on top (from 13% to 45%), Stephen is keen to encourage direct bookings through his website, using Google Analytics to help him determine where traffic is coming from. “I regularly check how many people have looked at my website,” he says. “We normally get 100 to 150 people per day. A lot of those are organic which means they’ve just typed in ‘boutique guesthouse in Brighton’, for example, and my website has come up, or sometimes they may have seen us listed by an agency and decided to check the website out.”

Another method that has proved effective in increasing direct bookings is reviews in national newspapers such as *The Times* and *The Telegraph*. A lucky break also came in the form of an opportunity to feature on Channel 4 TV show *Four in a Bed*. Having been put forward by the local destination organisation representing Brighton and successfully passing through the selection process, A Room with a View was featured in early 2014 and continues to experience a spike in enquiries whenever the programme is repeated.

Stephen also encourages more direct bookings by having a reciprocal agreement with other hotels in the area, directing potential customers to them when he has no vacancies and vice versa. “It’s fantastic to get on with your neighbours, because you get commission-free guests,” he explains. Advertising has also proved useful, with Stephen having more success online, taking out adverts on TripAdvisor after an advert in a glossy magazine >



From left: The exterior of A Room with a View; the top room enjoys a private balcony

> failed to have a noticeable impact. Online marketing has proved more effective because the people viewing his property have already made up their minds to come to Brighton, and just need to choose a hotel. Whereas those seeing a printed advert may not even be thinking about going on holiday.

Listen to the customer

Stephen received a VisitEngland four-star Silver award within a few weeks of opening, which helped bolster business from the start. “The assessor told me he’d given me the award because of my high-scoring bedrooms and bathrooms, friendly welcome and great breakfast,” says Stephen. “A lot of guests won’t even book a place unless they know the star rating, and having the VisitEngland Silver award can be persuasive when they’re deciding on which guesthouse to choose.” Since then, the guesthouse has won another VisitEngland award for its breakfast.

Despite the accolade, Stephen is determined to take customer feedback on board to keep guests satisfied. “We can’t know where we’re going right or wrong unless the guest tells us, so we leave a comment form in the room and always read them,” he says. “Within reason, I try to do what I can.” Most feedback is positive, but Stephen points out that there are still other things that he could be doing to keep guests happy – he is currently considering upgrading all of the rooms with air-conditioning. His advice to others? “Always look for ways to improve the business, and never become complacent.” ■



A day in the life

Stephen takes us through a typical day managing his guesthouse

6AM My alarm goes off and I get ready for the day ahead. Breakfast is generally the busiest time, so by 7am the pastries for breakfast are in the oven, the plate warmer is on and it’s time to prep the fruit salad and hollandaise sauce.

8AM I start serving the first guests their breakfast. I’ll work in any position, from waiter and cook to dishwasher and quality control.

11AM After clearing breakfast away, it’s check-out time, so I deal with that – moving cars around and saying goodbye to guests. After that, it’s also my first chance to catch up on emails and bookings.

1PM I conduct room checks and make sure housekeeping jobs have been done correctly. I’ll also check everything’s in working order and carry out any DIY maintenance.

2PM Time to take an hour’s power nap as instructed by a sleep clinic.

3PM I start working through a very long ‘to do’ list, which includes anything from putting up new shelves to reading guest feedback.

5PM The first new guests arrive, so I’ll start checking them in.

6PM Time for dinner!

7PM I’ll go back to working through my to do list, which is usually as long as my arm. It can include looking into marketing ideas, checking bookings for the next day and starting to implement the changes requested on the guest comment forms. I’ll often work until 10.30pm.

www.aroomwithaviewbrighton.com

Photography: Johanna Ward

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